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# The 4 Es of Successful Career Transitions



By Antoine Tirard (INSEAD MBA '97D), Founder, NexTalent, Claire Harbour (INSEAD MBA '92J), Founder, Culture Pearl, and Neil Courtis (INSEAD MBA '07D), Managing Director, Sensible Media

## **A navigational framework to take ownership of your career.**

Kavitha, a Canadian national, played tennis from a very early age. Her sporting skills and academic prowess earned her a place at Princeton and Oxford universities, as well as a spot on junior Grand Slam tournaments such as the U.S. Open and Wimbledon. Several years on the pro circuit brought her satisfaction but also pain and loneliness. After winning several championships, she decided to leverage her habits of hard work, persistence, resilience and discipline to transition towards the world of business.

While studying for her master's at Oxford, she was invited to join the consulting division of Tata Corporation and worked there for three years, starting as a management trainee. Setting the bar higher for herself, she pursued an MBA from INSEAD and carefully planned the next stage of her career. She joined the Coca-Cola Company, taking on roles of increasing scope. She attributes her success to her discipline, global mindset and ability to roll with the punches. Kavitha is a shining example of someone who has

explored her options, experimented with different contexts and engaged fully with her new situation, all the while continually expanding her horizons.

Career change is inevitable. Of course no job is for life, but did you know that the median employee tenure is only **4.2 years** in the United States? This figure is even lower (2.8 years) for workers in the 25-34 age group, which comprises the majority of the millennials. Considering the advance of the gig economy, AI rearing its head and many more indicators of a shift, executives must now take greater ownership of their careers. Preparation is key to managing the risk associated with change.

In our experience, proper career management requires a constant dedication to the four steps of successful professional transitions, or what we call the 4 Es: explore, experiment, engage and expand.

## **1. Explore**

Exploring will give you an opportunity to:

- Reflect on who you are
- Think about why and what you want to change
- Consider your career options.

This stage is the forward-looking process of searching for the next position. It's about examining the future, identifying opportunities and recognising your "pull" factors. Our key advice here: Do not hurry. Take the time to reflect and dream.

Talk to friends and family and ask them about your strengths and the paths you could take. However, do not fall for the tyranny of the "shoulds". Find all ways to know yourself better. Lastly, ask yourself what you would like to do. The figure below may help you.



Contrary to what you may expect, this exercise doesn't require you lock yourself alone in a room for a few days. You probably already have a lot of material to work with, starting with your resume, the knowledge of your career achievements, personality inventories or past 360° feedback reports.

## 2. Experiment

The goal of experimenting is to:

- Try out new things
- Build new connections
- Reframe and zero-in your search.

While a good deal of exploration is needed, meticulous planning may be neither possible nor desirable. Successful career transformation does not follow a linear and predictable path. The truth is making a big career change is a messy trial-and-error process. If you have some idea of what you want to do, take small, discovery steps and start building your connections. This will be an iterative process, and you may well find yourself in a one step forward, two steps back situation. However, the experimentation will provide support for your future decision.

To try out your ideas, do volunteer work or shadow somebody who already does the job you have in mind. Network to grow your connections in the relevant industry and assess where this information takes you. The idea is to get a sense of how the next job might feel, as opposed to immediately

moving forward.

### 3. Engage

Engaging will help you to:

- Find and launch yourself into your new role
- Unlearn old skill sets and learn new ones.

Once **you have found your new job**, you need to leverage your strengths and capitalise on your transferable skills. This is where Kavitha excelled, despite the apparently huge gap between tennis and fast-moving consumer goods sales operations. She built on relevant skills, but toned down others, like pure competitiveness, which would not have served her as well.

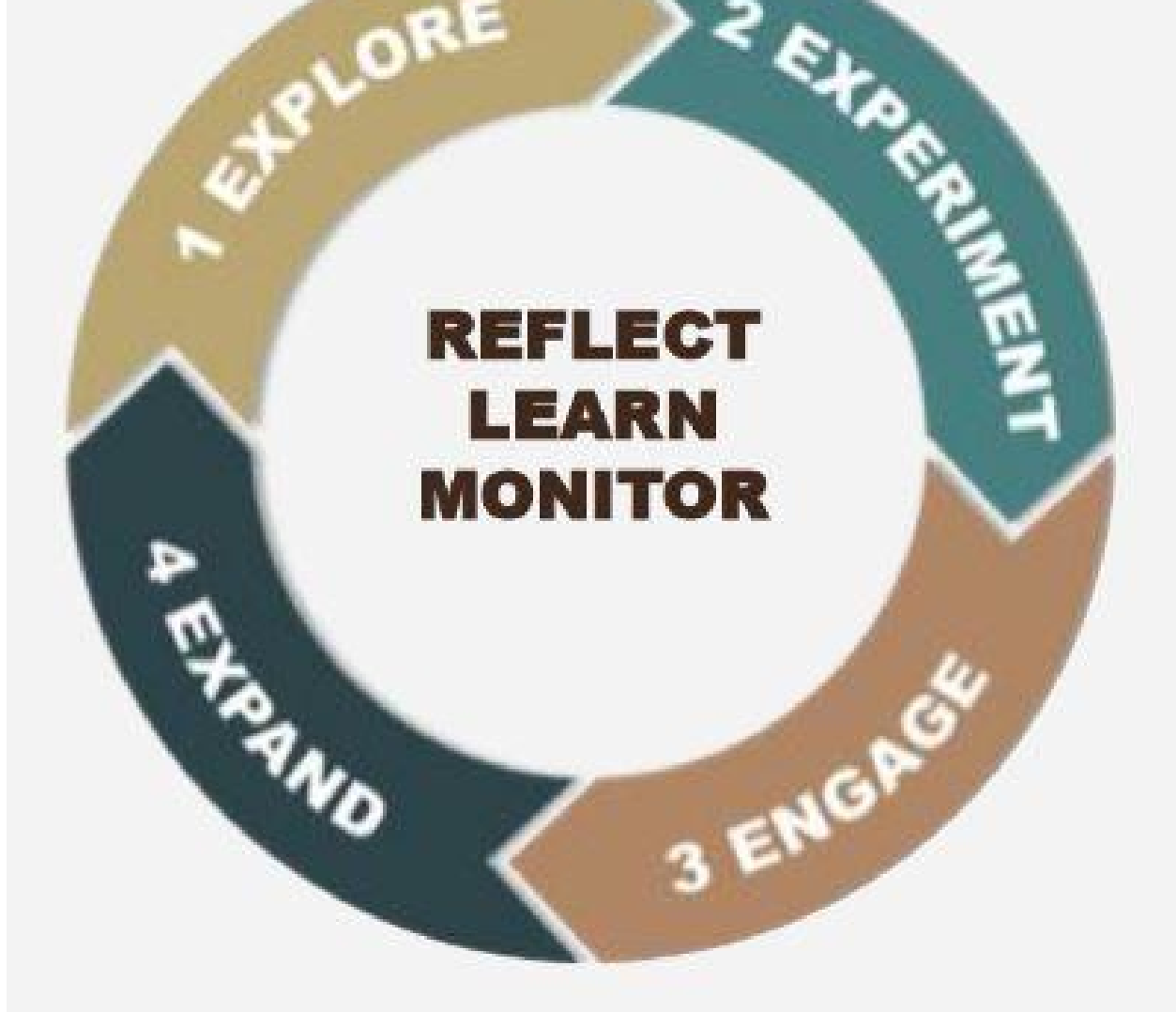
During this stage, you must manage your emotions and find personal balance. In your new role, you can expect to experience a number of surprises, frustrations or disappointments. You might not fit in immediately or you may feel confused at times. This is why you need to ensure you get **proper onboarding** in order to successfully assimilate into your new organisation's culture. Finding a great coach to accompany you on this part of the journey can often be a tremendous help.

### 4. Expand

The last step, expanding, will allow you to:

- Deliver and thrive in your new role
- Consolidate and expand your capabilities
- Continue to reflect on your career journey.

Unfortunately, life isn't always easier after the proverbial first 90 (or 100) days. The path remains beset with risks and challenges. Up to **50 percent** of externally sourced executives fail within their first 18 months on the job. So it's important to never stop learning and adjusting. In fact, it's best to think of your career as a continuous wheel, as in the illustration below.



Even if you are fully happy in your new career, don't forget to allocate time to reflect and think about new potential opportunities. Constant learning and monitoring are also part of the process. By keeping our 4 Es top of mind, you will be ready to seize opportunities when they come along, or when it becomes necessary to do so.

Stay tuned for our next article, ["Am I Too Old to Switch Careers?"](#)

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